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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 001566

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV MOPS IT EUN IRAOI FREEDOM ITALIAN POLITICS
SUBJECT: IRAQ: ROMAN BREAKFAST: BERLUSCONI SERVES HAM, PRODI
WAFFLES

REF: A. ROME 1527
B. ROME 1491
C. ROME 1278

CLASSIFIED BY: POLITICAL MINISTER-COUNSELOR TOM COUNTRYMAN FOR REASONS
1.5 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. PM BERLUSCONI REACTED TO ZAPATERO'S WITHDRAWAL DECISION BY PUFFING OUT HIS CHEST AND CLAIMING THAT ITALY IS NOW AMERICA'S NUMBER ONE ALLY IN CONTINENTAL EUROPE. IT WILL STAY THE COURSE BUT PUSH FOR AN ENHANCED UN ROLE TO ASSIST WITH IRAQ'S POLITICAL TRANSITION. ROMANO PRODI, NOW FULLY IMMersed IN ITALIAN POLITICS AS THE LEADER OF THE LARGEST BLOC WITHIN THE OPPOSITION CENTER-LEFT, USED THE OCCASION TO DANCE AROUND HIS POSITION ON IRAQ. A ZAPATARISTA "WANNA BE", PRODI SAID SPAIN IS CONTRIBUTING TO EUROPEAN UNITY ON IRAQ, BUT ALLOWED HIS PRESS SPOKESMAN TO NOTE THAT THE EC PRESIDENT DOES NOT SUPPORT IMMEDIATE WITHDRAWAL OF ITALIAN TROOPS. THE SPANISH DECISION, COMBINED WITH PRODI'S WAFFLING APPROACH, UNDERCUTS THE EFFORTS OF MODERATE CENTER-LEFT LEADERS TO ADOPT A RESPONSIBLE POSITION TOWARD ITALY'S COMMITMENTS. WITH THE CENTER-LEFT FEELING THE ATTRACTION OF THE FRENCH-GERMAN-SPANISH ORBIT, BERLUSCONI'S NCAA-LIKE "WE'RE NUMBER ONE" SHOUT IS RINGING TRUER. WE HAVE HIM--AND PRESIDENT CIAMPI--TO THANK FOR ITALY'S STILL BEING VERY MUCH IN THE IRAQ GAME. END SUMMARY.

WE'RE NUMBER 1

¶2. (SBU) PM ZAPATERO'S DECISION TO WITHDRAW SPANISH TROOPS FROM IRAQ PROVOKED MARKEDLY DIFFERENT RESPONSES FROM ITALY'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN AND OUT OF GOVERNMENT. PM BERLUSCONI BURNISHED HIS RESUME OF MEMORABLE PHRASES ON APRIL 19 WHEN HE PROUDLY STATED THAT, "WE CAN TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE FACT THAT ITALY IS NOW CONSIDERED THE CLOSEST ALLY OF THE UNITED STATES IN CONTINENTAL EUROPE." "NOW THAT SPAIN IS WITHDRAWING FROM IRAQ," HE ADDED, "WE CAN FURTHER IMPROVE ON OUR RELATIONS WITH THE U.S." GENERAL FILIBERTO CECCHI, HEAD OF THE ITALIAN JOINT FORCES COMMAND, COMMENTED SEPARATELY THAT ITALY COULD NOT, HOWEVER, BE EXPECTED TO FILL THE GAP BEING LEFT BY THE SPANISH BECAUSE ITS FORCE GENERATION CAPACITY WAS MAXED OUT.

¶3. (SBU) FOLLOWING HIS MEETING THIS WEEK WITH UN SPECIAL ENVOY BRAHIMI, BERLUSCONI AFFIRMED THAT ITALIAN FORCES WILL REMAIN IN IRAQ TO HELP GUARANTEE THE SECURITY FRAMEWORK NECESSARY FOR A SMOOTH TRANSITION OF POWER TO IRAQI AUTHORITIES ON JUNE 30. LEAVING NO ROOM FOR UNCERTAINTY, HE ADDED THAT ITALIAN MILITARY AND CIVILIAN PERSONNEL WILL CONTINUE THEIR HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS TO ASSIST THE PEOPLE OF IRAQ. BERLUSCONI BRUSHED OFF DS LEADER PIERO FASSINO'S CALL FOR AN EXTRAORDINARY EU COUNCIL MEETING TO FORGE A COMMON EUROPEAN POSITION ON IRAQ.

PRODI: WITHDRAWAL GOOD...UNLESS ITS BAD

¶4. (SBU) ROMANO PRODI, WHOSE INCREASING FIRST-PERSON FORAYS INTO THE ITALIAN POLITICAL ARENA MAKE US WONDER WHETHER HE ISN'T NOW MOONLIGHTING AS EC PRESIDENT, "SERVED UP A WAFFLE" ON IRAQ BEFORE A GATHERING OF SUPPORTERS IN ROME ON MONDAY. PRODI SAID HE INTERPRETED ZAPATERO'S DECISION AS A MEANS OF EXERTING STRONG PRESSURE FOR A SOLUTION (UNDEFINED). SPAIN, PRODI CROWED, HAS NOW RETURNED TO OUR (READ CENTER-LEFT OPPOSITION COALITION OLIVE TREE) LINE AND THE SPANISH WITHDRAWAL IS HELPING TO "UNIFY EUROPE AROUND A COMMON POSITION." (NOTE: PRODI CONVENIENTLY IGNORED THE FACT THAT A MAJORITY OF NATO'S MEMBERS ARE ON THE GROUND IN IRAQ). PRODI'S SPOKESPERSON JUMPED IN ALMOST IMMEDIATELY TO "CLARIFY" FOR REPORTERS THAT THE "EC PRESIDENT STILL THINKS THAT AN IMMEDIATE WITHDRAWAL OF ITALIAN TROOPS FROM IRAQ WOULD NOT BE WISE." IN PRIVATE, PRODI HAS REPORTEDLY TOLD FOLLOWERS THAT ITALY IS A GLOBAL POWER WITH RESPONSIBILITIES AND, AS SUCH, A DISTINCTION HAS TO BE MADE BETWEEN WITHDRAWING TROOPS FROM IRAQ NOW AND SENDING THEM IN THE FIRST PLACE.

¶5. (C) WITH THE CENTER-LEFT OPPOSITION DEEPLY DIVIDED OVER IRAQ POLICY, PRODI'S WAFFLING MIGHT MAKE POLITICAL SENSE, EVEN IF IT DOES NOT INSTILL CONFIDENCE IN HIS LEADERSHIP QUALITIES. BY TALKING THE TALK OF THE REAL ITALIAN ZAPATARISTI (GREEN PARTY, THE LEFT WING OF THE DS, COMMUNIST RENEWAL) PRODI IS MAKING A BID TO KEEP PACIFIST VOTERS IN HIS CAMP--ENTICED BY THE PHILOSOPHY "MORE UN, LESS U.S."--WITHOUT

HAVING TO WALK THE WALK BY CALLING FOR "WITHDRAWAL NOW".

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POSITION LEADERS TO HEW MORE CLOSELY TO ZAPATERO'S LINE IS MOUNTING.

DIVERGING POLITICAL SOLAR SYSTEMS

16. (C) ZAPATERO'S PRECIPITOUS STEP FURTHER EXACERBATED PARTISANSHIP ON IRAQ THAT HAD BEEN MOMENTARILY QUELLED BY A SENSE OF NATIONAL UNITY AROUND THE OBJECTIVE OF FREEING THE THREE ITALIANS STILL BEING HELD HOSTAGE. IT MAY MAKE IT MORE DIFFICULT FOR RESPONSIBLE CENTER-LEFT LEADERS SUCH AS FASSINO AND DAISY PARTY LEADER FRANCESCO RUTELLI TO ARGUE PERSUASIVELY IN FAVOR OF AN ENHANCED ROLE FOR THE UN WHILE EMPHASIZING THAT IMMEDIATE WITHDRAWAL WOULD NOT SERVE THE INTERESTS OF THE IRAQI PEOPLE. INDEED, FASSINO SAID ZAPATERO'S DECISION MAKES THE NEED TO CHANGE COURSE IN IRAQ--WHICH HE DEFINED AS THE UN ASSUMING POLITICAL-MILITARY CONTROL OF MULTINATIONAL FORCES--ALL THE MORE PRESSING. IN CONTRAST TO BERLUSCONI'S TOUTING OF ITALY'S ALLIANCE WITH THE U.S., THE FRANCO-GERMAN-SPANISH ORBIT IS EXERTING A STRONG PULL ON THE OPPOSITION.

17. (C) THE DAISY CAN BE EXPECTED TO PUSH BACK, HOWEVER. ENRICO LETTA, ONE OF THE PARTY'S STARS, TOLD A REPORTER ON APRIL 20 THAT "ZAPATERO'S POSITION IS NOT OURS", AND ADDED FAIRMINDEDLY, "WE SHOULDN'T BE GUIDED BY ZAPATERO SINCE WE CRITICIZED BERLUSCONI FOR NIPPING TOO CLOSELY AT AZNAR'S HEELS." RUTELLI, FOR HIS PART, HAS BEEN THE STRONGEST, MOST MODERATE OPPOSITION VOICE, ADOPTING A STANCE IN SYNC WITH PRESIDENT CIAMPI'S (WHO HAS CALLED FOR AN ENHANCED UN ROLE AND THE CONTINUATION OF ITALY'S HUMANITARIAN MISSION IN IRAQ), ALTHOUGH HE HAS NOT BEEN CLEAR ABOUT HIS POSITION ON MILITARY CONTROL OF COALITION FORCES POST-JUNE 30.

18. (C) COMMENT. PRODI'S PRONOUNCEMENTS ON IRAQ HAVE NOT HELPED TO BUILD AN OPPOSITION CONSTITUENCY FOR A SUSTAINED ITALIAN COMMITMENT TO STABILIZATION AND RECONSTRUCTION. WHILE BERLUSCONI IS PRONE TO HYPERBOLE, HIS NCAA-LIKE "WE'RE NUMBER ONE" SHOUT RINGS TRUE. WE HAVE HIS LEADERSHIP--AND PRESIDENT CIAMPI'S MODERATION--TO THANK FOR ITALY'S STILL BEING VERY MUCH IN THE IRAQ GAME. (NOTE: LAST WEEK'S LETTER FROM PRESIDENT BUSH TO CIAMPI CERTAINLY HELPED KEEP HIM LEANING THE RIGHT WAY.) A NEW UNSC RESOLUTION--SOONER RATHER THAN LATER--WOULD BUCK UP THE GOVERNMENT PRIOR TO EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN JUNE, HELP IT HELP US, AND UNDERCUT THOSE ON THE LEFT WHO WANT ITALIAN TROOPS HOME. END COMMENT.

19. MINIMIZE CONSIDERED.

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